

Film Launches Call to Open Secret J.F.K. Files

Oliver Stone may have bent facts, but he touched a nerve. Papers likely will reveal less than most expect.

By ART PINE
TIMES STAFF WRITER

WASHINGTON—"JFK," Oliver Stone's controversial three-hour docudrama about a sinister U.S. government plot to kill President John F. Kennedy, may have drawn brickbats here for having shamelessly bent the facts, but it also is forcing Washington to rethink a long-fester-ing question:

Should the records of the Kennedy assassination—gathered by the Warren Commission, which officially investigated the shooting, and by the House Assassinations Committee, which probed it during the 1970s—be kept closed?

In the few short months since the movie came out, Congress, the White House and the National Archives, which has charge of the Warren Commission's evidence, have been deluged with letters, calls and visitors all demanding that the documents be made public.

"There's no question that that movie did produce results," says Stephen Hess, a Brookings Institution media critic who confesses he hates the movie "with a passion," even though his own daughter-in-law, Heidi Levitt, served as casting director.

"Most if not all of that material will be opened up, and it simply would not have happened if it had not been for the personal paranoia of Oliver Stone," Hess says grudgingly. "There probably really were not any very good reasons for keeping them closed in the first place."

REACTION: Several efforts are under way to open up more files. Among them:

- Rep. Louis Stokes (D-Ohio), chairman of the now-defunct House panel that investigated the assassination, has said he will push through a resolution ordering the unsealing of the 848 boxes

of unpublished documents that the committee gathered.

The papers, sent to the National Archives for safekeeping, otherwise would be kept under lock and key until the year 2029—a routine, congressionally ordered procedure for all House and Senate records that have not been made public officially.

- Although the archives has no control over which of the records that it stores can be made public, it has asked the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Central Intelligence Agency to review all assassination-related documents now on deposit, in hopes of opening more soon.

"It's easier to open records than to keep them closed," says Michael R. McReynolds, director of the archives' textual reference division.

- The Dallas City Council—stung by insinuations that the city where Kennedy was shot must be hiding something—has made public some 2,500 formerly secret letters, photos and other pieces of evidence gathered over the years by the Dallas Police Department.

Domingo Garcia, a newly elected councilman, says he asked for the release after seeing "JFK" and thinking about the bad image it created for the city. "I thought this was a way to close the lid on that ghost," he says.

Hess and other analysts say there is no doubt that Stone's film has tapped into a raw nerve about the Kennedy assassination—although whether it is because Stone has bent the facts or in spite of it is open to argument.

Former President Gerald R. Ford, quoted in an opinion page piece in the Washington Post written by David W. Belin, former counsel to the Warren Commission, criticizes the Stone film for fostering "the big lie," dismissing its assertions of a con-

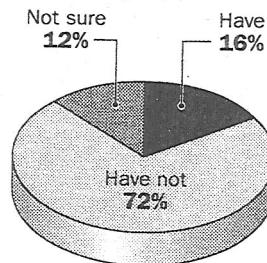
National Perspective

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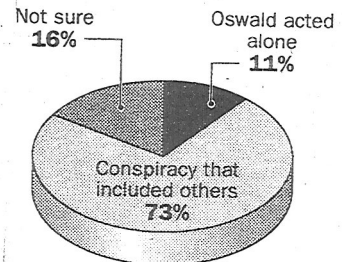
Views on the Kennedy Assassination

The docudrama on John F. Kennedy's assassination has stirred a call for greater scrutiny of the investigation. Even as the movie opened in late December, a poll found Americans skeptical about the official version of events.

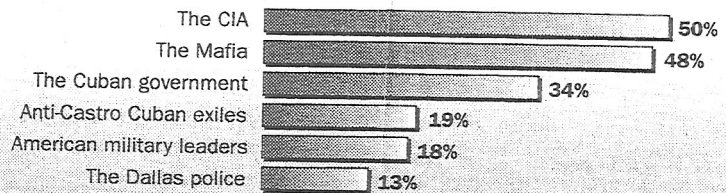
Q. Do you think that the American people have or have not been told the whole truth about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy?



Q. Do you think that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone in the Kennedy assassination or do you think that there was a conspiracy that included other people?



Q. Which, if any, of these groups do you think might have been involved in a conspiracy to assassinate President Kennedy?



Source: Time magazine-CNN poll taken Dec. 17-22, 1991

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spiracy as "false charges."

Despite the stir over the pending disclosures, most of the assassination-related evidence already has been made public. McReynolds says 98% of the Warren Commission evidence that his agency has on file is now in the public domain. Some, like tax returns, can never be unveiled.

OUTLOOK: Some scholars suggest that the opening of the now-secret files may reveal less than most people expect—and may compromise longtime intelligence sources and even spread unverified reports that could damage the reputations of innocent Americans.

Some experts also fear that publication of the House panel's files could follow the example attributed to the Stone film of spreading misinformation. Insiders say the still-secret documents—not cited in the panel's report—suggest that the Mafia may have been involved.

At the same time, however, Hess asserts that whatever the House records suggest, "it can't be more confused than Oliver Stone already left us." Recent polls have shown that most people believe Americans still have not been told the whole truth about the assassination.

Late last month, a dozen lawyers who served on the Warren Commission joined Ford in calling for full disclosure of all sealed government records.

Stokes says he hopes to propose legislation to open the House committee records as soon as Congress returns from its President's Day recess—now slated to end at mid-month.

Meanwhile, McReynolds and other record-keepers are patiently trying to straighten out the distortions that they say the movie has planted in the public's mind. "No, John F. Kennedy's brain really isn't missing from the National Archives—we never had it," McReynolds says.